

Making covert aid to rebels overt

Shift in US policy may lessen room for compromise with USSR

By Charles Waterman
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Time was when any United States support to foreign revolutionaries was intended to be secret and deniable. Such concerns, it seems, have now passed.

Many political analysts feel this trend is unfortunate. They say an erosion of "deniability" will mean fewer opportunities for the US and Soviet Union to reach tacit understandings about contested areas and situations.

As a hypothetical example, the US decision to withdraw from Lebanon in 1984 in the face of civil war and attacks on US marines was politically painful. Imagine the

ANALYSIS

added difficulty if Moscow had loudly proclaimed a policy of direct support for the leftist and Muslim militias attacking American positions at the time. The US commitment could not have been readily discarded under such conditions without an unacceptable loss of credibility, and involvement could well have deepened.

Nevertheless, US officials now regularly tout assistance to various anticommunist movements around the world as a key ingredient of policy.

According to reports, a decision has been taken to furnish "several hundred" hand-held antiaircraft Stinger missiles to pro-Western guerrillas in Afghanistan and Angola. This marks another milestone in the erosion of previously sacrosanct principles that US involvement in shady international ventures should be deniable.

Stingers are a sophisticated US product. The \$75,000 portable missile system measures about five feet and uses an infrared system to seek its target. Its advanced technology allows it to be fired at oncoming aircraft from more than five miles away. Stingers cannot be bought on the black market, are not made by other nations, and have not been lost in any war. In short, their "made-in-the-USA" trademark cannot be ignored by the Soviets.

Contrary to popular belief, the purpose of obfuscating

US involvement in such conflicts has not usually been to hide it from the Soviets. The openness of American politics makes this virtually impossible over time. It is, rather, to avoid the kinds of pressures which occur when both sides are forced to acknowledge that role publicly.

When a previously covert US program of support to anticommunist movements becomes overt or otherwise undeniable, several things happen:

- Perhaps most important, Soviet political credibility in its competition with the US is explicitly challenged to a degree not done by a covert operation. As long as the US role is not proclaimed and remains vague, the Soviets have an option of ignoring or downplaying it while reaching a compromise. With a direct challenge, however, their standing as a superpower is on the line.

- The political prestige of the US becomes committed to an extent not caused by an undeclared policy. Popular pressures make "winning" more important than the sometimes more appropriate goal of forceful dissuasion. And open debate of the issue in Congress and the press tends to force politicians into public commitments from which withdrawal is possible only with loss of face.

- As a corollary, the program tends to get larger than originally intended — or be eliminated altogether. More subtle gradations become difficult to sustain.

- Once an activity loses its covert nature, domestic constituencies favoring confrontation and jingoistic solutions are strengthened — in the US and Soviet Union. In the latter case, this has meant military predominance in the decisionmaking process, and more hawkish policies.

Reports of a US intention to supply Afghan rebels with Stingers, if true, constitute an additional direct US challenge to the Soviets. No matter how many rumors had previously circulated about American support for the mujahideen (Afghan guerrillas), tangible evidence was lacking. Moscow's leadership had the option of compromising — by withdrawing some troops without ascribing the setback to US pressure. But with US-supplied Stinger missiles killing Soviet troops and likely to be a major factor in the fighting, Moscow's international standing goes on the line and its hawks are strengthened.

In Angola, recent US statements of support to anticommunist rebels are undoubtedly encouraging to their cause. But the Soviets now find their prestige involved in a far more explicit — albeit still very limited — challenge from the US itself. One result could be greater unwillingness within the Soviet hierarchy to compromise. Elements favoring confrontation may find

prevail in an all-out effort to crush the rebels.

Many insist the subtlety of maintaining deniability is unimportant. Better a clear policy than an ambiguous half-stand, in this view.

If the US intends to commit sufficient resources to a situation to win, this may be true. But real-world confrontations are often more nuanced, and goals more limited. Washington or Moscow may welcome an opportunity to compromise in a manner signifying neither victory nor defeat.

Policies which increase options and encourage such flexibility — which covert operations sometimes do — have their place. The art of sustaining deniability is an arrow in a policymaker's quiver which can be discarded only at a cost.

The writer was a government official for two decades before becoming a consultant on international affairs.

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PICTURE ON PG. 2



US soldier with high-tech, portable Stinger missile